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RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME PRIORITY 0395
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RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA PRIORITY 1008
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 0576
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0026
RUEKDIA/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHHMUNA/USCINCPAC HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 001833

SIPDIS

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DCHA/OFDA FOR ROBERT THAYER
AID/W FOR AA MARK WARD AND ANE ANNE DIX
DEPT PASS TO SCA/EX
DEPT PASS TO SCA/PB
DCHA/FPP FOR MATTHEW NIMS AND PAUL NOVICK
ROME FOR FODAG
BANGKOK FOR RDM/A TOM DOLAN, ROB BARTON
KATHMANDU FOR USAID OFDA BILL BERGER AND SUE MCINTYRE

E.O.12958: N/A

TAGS: [EAID](#) [SOCI](#) [PNR](#) [PREL](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: IMPRESSIONS FOLLOWING OVERFLIGHT OF SIDR AFFECTED AREAS

1. SUMMARY: DATT, Office of Defense Cooperation (ODC) Chief, CONOff and six members of III Marine Expeditionary Force (III MEF)'s Humanitarian Assistance Survey Team (HAST), accompanied by a Bangladesh military officer, November 20 flew in a host nation military helicopter to survey damage from Cyclone SIDR and evaluate possible U.S. military Humanitarian Response/Disaster Relief (HA/DR) efforts. Initial impressions were that major infrastructure, like bridges and concrete buildings, largely survived even in hard-hit areas. However, other infrastructure, including road embankments and power lines, was severely affected. Large swaths of cropland were visibly damaged and less robust dwellings, such as those constructed of corrugated iron sheeting, sustained substantial destruction. Bangladeshi military and Coast Guard vessels were visible in several locations distributing aid supplies. END SUMMARY.

INITIAL LEG - DHAKA TO MONGLA

2. CONOff, who is working as pol-mil liaison during cyclone relief efforts, had the opportunity to join a November 20 military assessment of areas affected by Cyclone Sidr. The flight departed Dhaka and flew south-southwest towards the port at Mongla, the second largest port in Bangladesh, in Khulna division. The port facility in Mongla was not visibly damaged from our altitude of 1,000 ft. Multiple ships, including two Bangladeshi Navy or Coast Guard vessels, were at the docks, and others were navigating the waterways in and out of the port. Cell phones carried by the ODC Chief and CONOff showed coverage here, as they did, with a few exceptions, largely throughout the flight.

SECOND LEG - MONGLA TO SARAN K@OLA

3. The flight continued south from Mongla into the Sundarbans mangrove forest. Largely uninhabited, the area began to display damage to large trees. Especially noticeable in this and other areas was that the tops of the trees were beginning to turn brown, we suspect due to leaves dying due to broken branches. Waterways, however, appeared free of large debris. Turning eastwards, towards Saran Khola, we saw, for the first time, major damage at several locations, including completely demolished corrugated iron structures, boats washed ashore, and widespread uprooting of large

trees. Major roads appeared to be passable, however, as light traffic was seen at several points, and robust structures such as poured concrete buildings were still standing, as were cell phone towers and bridges.

THIRD LEG - SARAN KHOLA TO BARGUNA

¶4. This leg took us east, roughly parallel to Bangladesh's southern shore, from areas of mangrove forest to farmland, where we observed large swaths of crops that appeared flattened. This is consistent with the November 19 reports from Bangladesh Armed Forces Division (AFD) that these areas have completely lost the current rice crop, which was due to be harvested towards the end of November. (NOTE: AFD predictions were that the next crop will not be for at least four months. END NOTE.) Similar to Saran Khola, major infrastructure points seemed to have survived, but individual dwellings had clearly sustained damage ranging from minor to total. In this area, a Bangladeshi Coast Guard vessel was at anchor in the river distributing aid to a crowd assembled on shore using small, local boats. Whenever the helicopter circled a particular area, a crowd began to form at any nearby likely landing site. Two different Bangladesh military Landing Craft- Utility (LCU) were traveling the waterways loaded with white bags of relief goods.

FOURTH LEG - BARGUNA TO PATUAKHALI

¶5. Continuing eastward, as with other areas, we observed that cell phone towers remained standing and cell phones showed service, even when nearby houses were destroyed. The flight briefly paralleled a well-maintained two-lane road that had light traffic on it at 1030 a.m. Visible damage became less severe along this leg, with two-story corrugated iron structures showing no apparent damage from our altitude of 500 feet in some areas on this leg. We also observed local residents herding cattle out in the open for the first time.

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In some locations, river cargo boats were seen beached, presumably by the storm. Relief efforts were also evident, with large crowds receiving the same white bags as seen previously on the LCUs. At Patuakhali, as we had since approaching Barguna, we continued to observe severe damage to weaker structures as well as light traffic traveling along roads and bridges; cell phones also still showed service. The damage to crops continued the same as on the other legs since we first started seeing farmland.

FIFTH LEG - PATUAKHALI TO BARISAL

¶6. Proceeding north from Patuakhali to Barisal, we arrived at the principal airport in Bangladesh's central southern area at approximately 11:00 a.m. With a 6,000 ft runway, the Barisal Airport had already seen 49 Bangladeshi military MI-17 helicopter sorties deliver 123 tons of relief since the storm hit; Bangladeshi Air Force C-130 aircraft have also successfully used that runway to deliver relief materials. The majority of the relief goods had been distributed, but we were able to see the two different types of relief bags stockpiled at the Barisal airport for delivery. One was a 25 lb bag containing 10 kg rice, 2 liters of cooking oil, lentils (a common staple food item), soap, and cookies. Bangladeshi officers from the 55th Division explained this was designed to feed a family for 7 days. The other type of relief bag was a larger, 10 lb bag with cooking utensils, mosquito netting, clothing, and toilet articles; this kit is intended to be given once, one to a family. These bags were donated by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, pre-positioned in warehouses in Dhaka, and are clearly stamped with a Saudi Arabian logo. Lt Col Ali, the apparent area commander at Barisal Airport expressed frustration at the lack of media coverage on the positive response from the Bangladeshi military. At the same time, Lt Col Ali expressed a hope for the U.S. military to make a contribution to the relief effort.

COMMENT

¶7. Gross infrastructure largely survived Cyclone Sidr, and loss of life due to direct storm effects is likely close to an order of magnitude lower than previous, similar storms. Bangladesh now must face, possibly for the first time, a disaster of this magnitude

combined with survivors in these numbers. The immediate storm has passed, but the task of re-establishing basic hygiene, potable water production/distribution, shelter, and agriculture is just beginning.
END COMMENT.

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